Effective Change Management at the Departmental Level

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Introduction

Today's fast-paced, ever-changing business climate has raised the stakes in the ongoing competitive battle to do more with fewer employees and with greater efficiencies. More than ever, middle managers and frontline managers are faced with creating results during what seems to be an environment of perpetual change. Bringing employees through these changes in a positive manner only further challenges the managers. Lose employees' support, energy, or drive, and the change movement can be delayed or halted completely and the entire organization can suffer. The precarious nature of this arrangement magnifies the importance of managers having communication and change management tools to assist them during the change process to foster a positive sense of progress with the employees while also meeting the demands of senior management. When it comes to planning for change, preparing for change, defining roles and responsibilities during change, and evolving processes to support changes and directives, communicating with and involving employees on a regular basis as a group process is critical to success. Incremental change on a regular basis is received much more openly than radical efforts on rare occasions. More so, understanding how changes impact employees at the lowest levels of an organization is very powerful knowledge when working through changes.

The Current Situation

Modern management principles recognize the business advantage to having empowered managers who are in communication with their employees and who, as a team, can effect change with minimal stress and confusion. Consequently, companies make efforts to regularly communicate vision and strategies to their middle managers and frontline managers so that the managers can take the necessary actions to move their teams toward the vision. Unfortunately, how the managers act on and react to the vision is anything but systematic. Managers and employees are, in many cases, scrambling to get all the tasks done on a day-to-day basis, much less stepping back and proactively planning for, preparing for, and managing change within their departments.

Headlines everywhere warn: "Organizations now succeed or fail depending on how well they can adapt to change, anticipate change, and create positive change." The bottom line is that change has always been a factor, but today its impact is occurring at lightning speed.[3] Additionally, with more focus on the need to change, there are many options at a manager's disposal for managing change. (Diagram 1) Many of these options are designed for use across an organization, which then

Diagram 1 – Options to manage change

limits the department manager's choice of tools that address the specific department needs of today and tomorrow without top-level involvement, major expense, or a substantial time commitment. Of those managing change tools that are designed for department use, radical changes to the environment and strict adherence to a prescribed methodology may be necessary in order to get the promised results. After an initial boost and commitment to these programs, the momentum is often lost and the change initiative is replaced by yet another initiative. Some programs have activities that build skills, such as teamwork, by having a group resolve issues and problems in a fictitious world (e.g. the jungle) without a direct link to the business culture and the group's current issues and challenges. Fictional world programs do not produce wide-spread, sustainable change because all employees don't participate in the initial training activity and the programs are too far from the business to produce the systematic approaches; the immediate, measurable actions; and repeatable results. All of these are needed to build successes during the change process.

Ever changing programs to manage change, commonly referred to as "flavor of the month" programs, do not produce sustainable change management programs either. Changing programs too often makes employees feel as if there is no strategic plan in place, but only a desperate attempt to react to change. Unfortunately, at this point there is no regard for the quality of the programs attempted.

In short, executives need to productively change with change, rather than react to change. Innovative thinking must take place at every level, in the way the company operates and views its customers, its competitors, and change itself.[4]

The Problem Facing Many Managers Today

> *"Companies are realizing that people go up through the ranks in the company and end up managing people and large teams yet they have no training for it."*
>
> *Diane Bonneau, director of communications,*
> *Calgary Association of Professional Coaches,*
> *May 2004,* The Calgary Herald[5]

There are two typical paths to supervisory or management positions today:

Employees are often promoted to a supervisory position because they are the most senior or "best" employee. In many organizations, these people are promoted with little to no formal supervisory training. They usually end up learning these skills through experience on the job.

Others learn their supervisory skills through a university program, but have little real life work experience to tap into when they begin their management career.

Once in a supervisory capacity, what supervisors or managers do to improve their skills is very diverse. Some will benefit from the organization's formal supervisory training program, if one exists. Others will become self-taught through reading management books and looking for management resources. While some do very little to build their skills others work for a certain period of time then go back to the university setting for an MBA or additional training – putting theory and principles around their experiences.
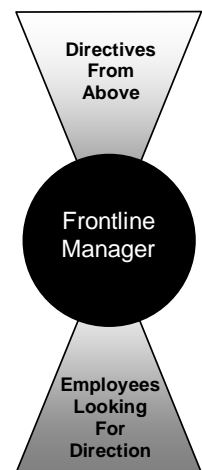
Diagram 2 – Forces on Supervisors and Managers

(Directives From Above / Frontline Manager / Employees Looking For Direction)

Regardless of the managers' background, one situation that every manager will face at some point in his/her career is that there are directives from senior management (with very little direction or explanation, usually because of the lack of time on senior management's part) while employees are looking for direction and understanding on how to meet the goals, given the new directives. (Diagram 2) The manager is in between the two groups, expected to make things happen while keeping the employees happy and productive. Supervisors and managers are often faced with this situation with very few resources or tools at their disposal, without sufficient guidance or mentorship from senior management. The manager's job is to become an effective leader who takes on the responsibility of enabling all employees to survive the change of today's organizational life.[6]

A Group-Process Based Approach

> *"Every great leap in the improvement of humankind and its organizations has more or less come from guided reflection. If there is not time for reflection, there is almost no chance for improvement."*
> *Fred Harburg, senior vp of leadership and management development,*
> *Fidelity Investments Company, March 2004[7]*

With the current recognition that participative management is both desired by employees and crucial for managers to build effective teams of employees, change management initiatives need to be grounded in clear, concise, logical, layman activities or processes that engage employees at all levels, while providing the group with enough information so that decisions affecting forward progress can be made based on where people are in the change process and where the ultimate goal promises to take them.

The management tools offered by Innovative Management Tools (IMT) revolve around seven fundamental keys to change management and overall process improvement. Each of the seven keys represents an acceleration point for the organization to make responsive management decisions at all levels.

1. Using Supervisors and Managers as the Conduit to Employees

Business leaders know that the success of a company is largely dependent on its employees. The more content the employees, the more effective, productive, dedicated, and hard working they become. The link between the leaders and the employees is the layers of supervisors and managers in the organization. Communication flow, overcoming day-to-day issues, inspiring employees to be the best employee possible, and helping the company reach its growth goals are only a few ways that supervisors and managers contribute to the organization.

However, as leaders become more and more focused on the growth of the company, dedicated time spent with supervisors and managers can dwindle, leaving the supervisor alone to face the departmental challenges. Even more daunting of a task is trying to manage a department with few to no management tools at one's disposal, yet continually trying to move the employees in ways that support the company vision.

IMT recognizes the value of having company vision and direction reinforced through the supervisors and managers. As often as possible, these visions and directions should be brought

into the day-to-day lives of the employees, driving decisions and keeping employees focused on those activities that support the company goals.

All IMT activities focus on making sure that the overall goals and visions of the company are understood at the onset or considered as decisions are made.

2. Engaging and Empowering Employees in the Change Process

"When asked what managers needed to improve most, 47 percent of the Human Resources people [surveyed] said "engaging people in strategy."
Right Management Consultants survey of 133 organizations
Miami Herald, October 2004[8]

Too often, change processes are more directive than participative. While it is important that the vision of the change and the desired strategy be communicated from senior management, human nature prompts employees to resist the change for several reasons – mostly because of lack of involvement in the change discussions and a lack of contribution in the decision making process. In most cases, employees are able and willing to rise to the challenge when asked to implement a change. Additionally, engaging the employees in the process and empowering them to define ways to reach the goals provides the needed buy-in for success.

Humans want to feel that they have a certain amount of control of their lives and their jobs. Asking for their input and tapping into their experiences shows employees respect for who they are and what they can contribute.

IMT recognizes that managers cannot make good, long-term decisions during the change process without first understanding how a decision will impact the employees and the processes. The best way for a manager to learn this is by tapping into the knowledge and experiences that the employees offer prior to making the decisions. Although a decision may not be popular with the employees, the fact that the decision was made based on facts, honesty, and employee input will go well beyond the short-term unhappiness.

3. Providing Concrete, Real-World Environments and Outcomes

In the ever-changing world of the employees, the details of their day-to-day job can blur together to the point that they may begin to ask themselves what they really do during the day. When building skills or action plans on how to improve one's environment, it is critical that real world examples stay prominent during the process. While building skills using fictitious environments (i.e., trapped on a deserted island, lost in the jungle, etc.) can be helpful, the challenge comes when making the leap from fiction to reality and applying the skills learned. What may seem very logical and successful in a simulated environment may fail in the real world. It is believed that training in a fictional setting allows participants to respond more openly and freely, away from any influences or politics that may exist in the group.

IMT tools allow the managers and employees to work in the real world, with real visions and scenarios, to create real world results that mean something to the employees at that moment and beyond. The non-threatening activities are aimed at including the employees from the beginning of the change process, before most negative feelings and influences have taken root.

4. Building Physical Communication Opportunities in a World of Electronic Communication

"You need to find strategies that increase the opportunities for contact among individuals and groups. Even when change is young, it is important to find ways to create a shift from independent ideas into a single vision, with all aligned."

Rick Maurer, Beyond the Wall of Resistance[9]

While e-mail, teleconferencing, and other methods of communication have dramatically changed the way we communicate in organizations today, mostly for the better, there is a growing realization that the lack of human, face-to-face communication is creating other voids and problems not encountered in the past. Many people feel that sometimes you just can't beat a personal face-to-face conversation if you want maximum comprehension. Therefore, whenever an innovation lifts our ability to communicate, status quo is disrupted and things change.[10]

While the electronic communication tools of today are wonderful, there are moments during the change process where there are distinct advantages to bringing a group of people together for a specific purpose, with specific goals in mind. Humans are social beings by nature. We crave human interaction. And in our world of complicated schedules and fast-paced lifestyles, finding time to convene as a group of employees to address a specific topic or resolve an issue is rare. Affording ourselves a few hours of pure, undisrupted, positive communication time periodically carries a host of positive payoffs.

5. Capitalizing on the Power of Small, Incremental Change at the Department Level

"We need management programs that include everyone. If the organization is changing, then all of us need to reevaluate how and why we do things – helping each other back to basic values and customer needs."

John Espy, elearning consultant
Usertech / Canterbury
April 2004, Training Magazine[11]

We have all heard, and generally accept that "people resist change." However, exploring the topic further, it is more likely that people resist change when they don't understand the rationale for the change, when they don't feel the need for change, or when the change is so dramatic that it takes people out of their comfort zone. People don't resist change as much as they fear uncertainty and the unknown. Most of us want change. We want to change from being stressed to feeling more relaxed. We want to free ourselves from limited choices and have a greater number of options.[12]

Employees want security in their jobs. As companies evolve, people want to know how the changes affect their department and their jobs – mostly so they can contribute to the effort and feel a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, the sooner managers can bring a sense of accomplishment and direction to the department level, the better. Managers need to break down the large change initiatives into smaller, incremental steps for two reasons. First, these steps are much easier for employees to accept, since a small step may only take them slightly out of their

comfort zone. After several small steps, employees realize that they have made one large step – usually without the anxiety and resistance they would express if one large step were proposed. Second, another positive aspect of taking smaller, incremental steps to change is that success is more likely with smaller steps, and the successes build on each other and start to fuel the change process.

All IMT tools are specifically designed with department level managers in mind. Using these frontline manager tools on a regular basis to effect small, incremental changes, the managers can effectively bridge the gap between "directives from above" while providing "direction for below."

6. Investing Time Upfront, Instead of Paying Later

"Pay now or pay later," the old saying reflects the point that is often disregarded in fast-paced companies today. Things move so quickly that there simply isn't time to think everything through thoroughly before acting. "Time is money," so move quickly and fix things later, if they become a problem.

While this thought process may provide the desired results in some cases, the seasoned manager realizes when it is time to slow down, plan a strategy, and set forth on the path to success feeling confident that there won't be surprises surfacing later because of poor planning. Slowing down doesn't mean wasting time, since time invested upfront can and will save time later when people are fixing problems that could have been avoided with adequate planning.

A key philosophy at IMT is to place a focus on preparing for, thinking through, and evaluating upcoming changes before taking action. If in doubt, or when faced with immediate action to get a large project started, the manager only needs to remember the fable of the "Tortoise and the Hare" and who won the race in the end.

7. Recognizing Employees Before, During, and After Change

Complex changes take time to initiate, implement, and fully integrate into a department or organization – perhaps several months or even years. Effective managers understand that employees look to their manager for inspiration and support before, during, and after a change event. Whether that inspiration comes from collecting employee input, listening to employees' ideas, clearly defining employee roles and responsibilities, removing barriers to change, or recognizing employees for their accomplishments, managers can and should play a direct and key role in keeping their employees motivated during the change process.

IMT tools give managers the opportunity to create a positive change environment by including employees in the decision-making process, by listening to their ideas, and by acknowledging that the employees' contributions are valid, desired, and considered.

The Innovative Management Tools Focus within the Organization

> *"Increasingly sophisticated consumers demand more options and customized solutions in both products and services. Future-oriented leaders will anticipate new demands and see the need for increasing niching."*
>
> *Robert B. Tucker,* 10 Driving Forces of Dynamic Change[13]

IMT products and services have a particular focus and niche in the marketplace and in the organization. Although the activities touch individual employees, senior management, and the company as a whole, the focus is really on departmental improvements and helping department managers and frontline supervisors become more effective, efficient, and successful. (Diagram 3)

Even though each company will find unique ways to utilize the activities to meet their specific needs, the driving factors remain consistent – change preparation, task management, barrier elimination, process improvement, employee recognition, priority management, and structured brainstorming.

The short, four-hour activities are designed to demand a low time investment while providing a high return. They are designed to give participants the information they need to modify their departmental processes, procedures, and priorities and support the company's larger goals.

Diagram 3 – The IMT Focus

The company leaders provide the vision while the managers manage the people and processes to fulfill the vision. IMT tools facilitate the management of the people and the processes.
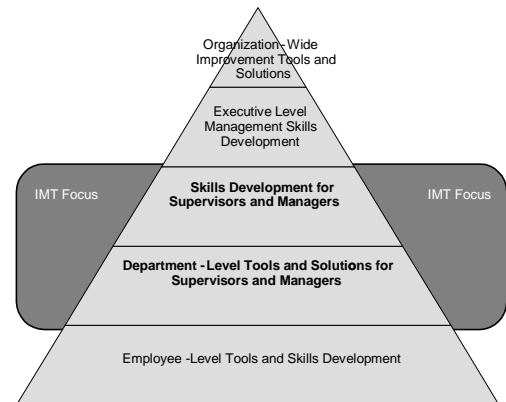
Change Management Best Practices

> *"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."*
> *John F. Kennedy, from* Mastering Change: The New Realities *by Mark Sanborn*[14]

While modern convention often suggests that effective change management must be an organization-wide commitment with senior-level buy-in, many times there is not a senior-level initiative and support for wide sweeping changes. In the cases where there is a senior-level commitment, departmental progress speeds up the change process. During times of no senior-level initiative or support for change, managers can effect change in their departments moving toward goals that they set for themselves until which time there is a clear vision. While explosive technological change is the driver today, other changes must not be ignored. If not observed and acted on, these forces can spell doom to a business. A "spot a change, create a response" mindset will become the touchstone of survival and success. What is required are not merely breakthroughs but constant improvements that add value in the customer's eyes.[15]

Certain universal change management principles and best practices are the heart of IMT activities:

Know Thy Department – It is difficult to communicate a change vision at the department level without a reference point. Knowing what the department does and how it fits into the organization provides that reference point. As new changes are announced, department employees are able to quickly assess how the upcoming changes will impact the department people and processes.

Frequency: Refine as changes are made to keep the reference point current with IDENTITY™, Departmental Positioning Activity.

Prepare for Change – Don't go into a change blindly or without adequate preparation. Avoid false steps; Reduce employee anxiety, frustration, and confusion; Speed up the change process.

Frequency: Take time to prepare each time there is a complex change initiative on the horizon with NAVIGATE™, Complex Change Preparation Activity.

Define Clear Roles and Responsibilities – Get the right people in the right jobs; Reduce duplication of efforts; Eliminate useless tasks or tasks that don't support department priorities; Balance workloads and priorities across employees.

Frequency: Assess and refine task allocations every 6 months in each department with HATS™, Task Management Activity.

Eliminate Barriers – Overcome objections to change by learning what it takes to counter and eliminate the objections. Taking away employees' personal objections to a change is a great way to win change supporters.

Frequency: Review objections every time change initiative progress is slowed or stalled with HURDLES™, Barrier Identification and Elimination Activity.

Improve Processes Regularly – Include employees who are doing the smallest tasks within a process when looking for improvement ideas. Open, honest discussion and analysis of a process creates a healthy, empowered workforce.

Frequency: Review processes every 6 months using SNAPSHOT™, Process Improvement Activity.

Praise Frequently – Build momentum, inspire employees, and sustain energy by providing regular praise, feedback, recognition, and reward for jobs well done in support of the larger, company goals.

Frequency: Provide daily personal praise, monthly public recognition, and periodic rewards with AWARDS™, Employee Recognition and Award Kit.

Prioritize Effectively – With so many things to do (mostly above and beyond the normal job duties) when managing a change initiative, provide employees with clear priorities and the proper training to complete the tasks.

Frequency: Assess priorities periodically as the change process unfolds with PRIORITIZE™, Priority Management Activity.

Nurture Creativity – Encourage creativity from employees, but not at the sake of chaos or deviation from the goals and focus. Provide a structured environment where employees can think freely, offer suggestions, and consider others' ideas while still keeping the company and department goals in mind.

Frequency: As projects or change initiatives arise and it is determined that a structured brainstorming session is needed to collect ideas and input from a variety of people, use IDEAS™ Brainstorm Activity.

Conclusion

> *"Customers have little interest in classes, learning management systems, or blended learning. Their passion is for improved business performance, at the highest impact, with the lowest cost, and in the least disruptive manner possible."*
> *Fred Harburg, senior vp of leadership and management development,*
> *Fidelity Investments Company, March 2004[16]*

Change is no longer an individual incident or an event. Change is now a way of everyday life in organizations. Departmental changes happen simultaneously and often need dates and milestones to coincide, if the company's change process is to be successful. While managers need to recognize all the change movements as one large evolution, they also need to manage each one individually to success.

Today's business is a business of managing change at the department level to improve business performance. IMT provides real world, systematic, measurable, and repeatable approaches to managing change at the department level. IMT activities' back-to-basics communication approach (people talking to people) integrates minimal time investment, tangible applications of management principles, employee involvement, and realistic action plans for success in virtually any environment or organization. These common sense, employee-empowering activities help bridge the gap between senior management and employees – providing departmental supervisors and managers with innovative management tools they need to manage change now and for years to come.

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